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# THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

## PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

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### PERCEPT AND OBJECT IN COMMON SENSE AND IN PHILOSOPHY

#### I

#### THE COMMON SENSE DOCTRINE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

WE have had, within the past few years, much discussion of perception and its object. The problem has betrayed itself as a parting of the ways—as significant for what the solution accorded it may result in—and not merely as in itself furnishing material for the exercise of intellectual curiosity. The realists, recently grown very bold, have urged their doctrine, or the somewhat differing varieties of their doctrine, with earnestness and insistence. The idealists, not wholly united, as is quite natural, have, nevertheless, made something like common cause, and have defended themselves with energy. The pragmatists, though they may call themselves realists, do not seem to have been precisely in either camp. Where so many clever men, of different standpoints, consent to give their attention to the one problem, and where they work, not in isolation, but stimulated by dispute, and conscious of the points of agreement or of difference that characterize them, it would be strange if the various facets of the problem under discussion were not presented to us with a good deal of clearness. And if there is a pronounced flaw in any facet, it seems unlikely that we should be allowed to be inattentive to it.

So many have written, and many have written so well, that the difficulty of presenting the problem in any distinctly new aspect must make itself acutely felt. Has not every facet already been inspected? Has not the importance of each been insisted upon? Then why waste effort in trying to bring before the reading public a new one?

Fortunately, such is not my task. I am concerned rather to do something which has, I think, attracted less careful attention than

the exhibition of the significance of individual aspects of the problem. I am concerned to inquire whether, if we take into consideration *all* the aspects, trying to do justice to each, and to avoid exaggerating the importance of each, our problem may not become less an apple of discord, and more a problem whose reasonable solution need not leave any of us wholly discontented and humiliated by the consciousness of unredeemed error.

My way of approach to this task lays itself open to the charge of bringing philosophy down into the market-place, where we do not usually look for philosophy. What I have to say in my justification I shall say a little later. Here I shall begin at once with what I shall call the common sense doctrine of percept and object. I wish to call attention to its many-sidedness, and to point out that the elements in it do not appear, on the surface, at least, to be wholly in accord with one another. This lack of harmony between the articles of his creed does not seem to distress the plain man. It does not embarrass him in his dealings with things. It may cause acute distress to the philosopher who agrees with him heartily upon the one point, but can not see how he can conscientiously give assent, at the same time, to another.

I hope I may be permitted to include under the common sense doctrine opinions formulated, half-formulated, and ready to be formulated. This is rather loose, to be sure, but common sense is, in a sense, a loose and vague term. If a man can act, but remains absolutely blind to what he is doing when he acts, we can not say that he has any doctrine at all. We can hardly affirm that men generally are in this state. Most of them appear to be dimly aware, at least, of what they are doing when they are dealing with the things about them. Some, even of the unlearned, have rather definite opinions—they have arrived at something like a formulation, even though it be not couched in very general terms. And a man's mind may hold in solution opinions which will not take the form of a precipitate unless some definite question be asked and he be pressed for an answer.

But, if the asking of the question at once results in the precipitate; if the man under interrogation claims something as his opinion; if he insists that he has always known the truth in question—does it seem just that we should dwell much upon the fact that he has not before been led to formulate his belief in a general way? The fact that he does not speak as a philosopher, and that he may be unaware of the mutual consistency or inconsistency of his statements, as well as of the consequences which may be deduced from his admissions, speaks rather for the spontaneity and impartiality with which he attempts to describe what seems given in his experience.

I do not mean to speak dogmatically touching the articles of the

common sense doctrine. What I put forward is offered for criticism. It is not the expression of a fixed conviction which I am unwilling to modify in the face of evidence. Such as it is, let us look at it critically.

I. Does not the plain man hold that percept and object may vary independently; that the former may cease to exist while the latter continues to exist; that the two may have different times of being; that to each must be assigned its own place in the system of things; that the percept may be relatively simple while the object is very complex?

If he holds all this, does he, or may he, also hold that when percepts are given in experience, objects are given in experience? Does not his doctrine exclude all talk of the numerical identity of percept and object?

That the plain man does take the positions indicated above appears undeniable, when we remain in the region of the concrete, and apply ourselves to simple illustrations. Thus,

1. Does he not accept the commonplace fact that walking around a table and looking at it will result in a whole series of different percepts, while the table perceived remains unchanged?

2. Is he not aware that the percept may cease to be—that he may close his eyes—while the object, the table, continues to exist?

3. Does he not know that an occurrence may be perceived after it has ceased to exist? that he may hear a sound long after the blow has been struck? that he may see a star which no longer shines?

4. Does not the plain man, if interrogated, refer the percept to “the mind,” and the mind to the body? Where does he put the table perceived?

5. Does any man who exercises ordinary common sense ever suppose that he perceives the whole of a table at once, inside and outside, back and front? or does he recognize that the table is something far richer and more complex than any percept of it?

It seems, then, that common sense accepts percept and object as two, making no effort to get on without either; and it appears as clear that it treats these two in distinctly different ways. Nor does it seem indicated that it regards these two as given in experience “side by side.” Men do not normally see double. Does common sense, then, *implicitly* deny that the *object* is immediately given in experience? Or does it *implicitly* deny the *percept*? On the surface, it does not appear willing to do either.

II. May we not say that common sense *tacitly* accepts the fact that we can know things *only as they appear to us*? And is not this a virtual denial that objects perceived are independent things?

What plain man is ignorant of the significance of the senses and

brain in our knowing of things? We find it natural that eyes should reveal colors, ears sounds, and finger-tips something different. Who does not know that, where a given sense is lacking, objects can not be perceived under the guise appropriate to that sense.

And certainly no plain man living ever attempts to know objects as unknown—as “out of the cognitive relation,” whatever that may mean. I apologize for the use of the technical expression in discussing anything so little technical as common sense. I mean only to indicate that, whatever the conditions of our knowing may be, objects known appear to be accepted by men generally as none the worse for their being known, and as quite capable of satisfying all the theoretical and practical purposes with which investigations are undertaken.

Does it follow that common sense regards the object given in experience as a something dependent upon our own constitution? Would it be willing to maintain that we can know things only as they appear to us, and that they appear to us as they do because we are what we are? May we contrast with such a knowledge of things the knowing of things independently, and regard the latter as a conceivable, if unattainable, extension of knowledge?

III. He who dwells exclusively upon what has been said so far, might easily be led to maintain that common sense accepts, tacitly, at least, that percepts are not the same as their objects, but are numerically distinct; that we know objects only through percepts; that the latter are dependent upon our constitution, and must take their color from us; and that, consequently, we may not say that objects independent of us are directly given in experience. This seems to make common sense subjectivistic.

But, surely, he who feels impelled to maintain that this is the common sense doctrine must recognize the necessity of further maintaining that it is accepted only tacitly and unconsciously by the plain man to whom he attributes it. For, stated boldly and explicitly, it appears to arouse opposition and irritation. The plain man is driven to protest, somewhat as did Thomas Reid. And even if no active protest is elicited from him, in the cases where he is let alone and is not rendered anxious about the possible consequences of his admissions and assumptions, do we not find him making other assumptions quite different in their suggestions from those indicated above?

Thus, does he not maintain that, in perceiving, he is always experiencing *objects*, not copies, not images, not representatives of any sort, but the objects themselves? Are not these the objects that may remain unchanged, although the percepts vary? that may continue to exist when the percepts go out of being? Is not this an assertion of the independence of the object given in experience?

The plain man is, to be sure, quite ready to admit that, under given circumstances, he may enjoy a poor view of the object. But what is his remedy for this? Is it not to obtain a better view? And it is a view *of the object* that he seems to want. The fact that it is a *view* of the object never seems to trouble him, or to rob him of the object itself. Suppose we tell him that, in perceiving, he can never, under any conceivable circumstances, get anything but "views," and that such views are never the object, and may all be quite unlike it. Will he be inclined to cast about for some other method of getting at the object, or will he simply disregard our insinuations and go on doing what he did before?

It seems too much to expect him to admit that he has never known objects. He has always known that he has experienced them under a variety of aspects, but this does not appear to have prevented him from finding out a great deal about them. He has distinguished between delusive appearances of objects and, as he expresses it, objects as they really are. He has seen the man of science deal with things as he does, but more systematically and thoroughly, and he has not found him embarrassed by the fact that observation results in views of things. Objects have been described as though they were given in experience. No embarrassment has resulted from this treatment of them. They have been described, they *are* described, in a multitude of scientific books, and no mention has been made of the fact that the books in question are dealing only with "views." They seem to be describing objects, and it seems to be assumed that the objects have been *observed, experienced* by some one.

May we expect the plain man to recognize the situation as a "predicament"? What sort of a predicament is it that occasions no one any inconvenience, and never prevents any one from doing anything that he wants to do? And, to recur to a point touched upon a little above, can we expect the plain man to feel that he is put in a "predicament" by the fact that he can not experience things except as he experiences them, or describe them except as they are revealed to him? Is he compelled to undertake this peculiar task, if he would describe things *as they are*? Is it properly a task to be performed either by the plain man or the man of science? Neither appears to have the slightest desire to undertake it, nor does either appear to consider his account of objects incomplete merely because he has not supplemented his account of objects as known by an account of them as he does not and can not know them.

The plain man, then, whatever else he believes, seems to believe that, not percepts merely, but *objects*, are given in his experience—the objects which he distinguishes from percepts, which may remain unchanged though percepts vary, which may continue to exist when

percepts of them drop out of being. Shall we put this down as a part of the common sense doctrine?

IV. Again, admitting all that has been said about the plain man's consciousness of the part played by the sense-organs and the nervous system in the perception of objects, could we induce him to acquiesce in the statement that a man, in knowing an object, *creates* it wholly or partially? Would he even be willing to admit that the object is *changed* in becoming known?

Thus, we all know that the experience which a man has of the contents of a given room must be different from the experience of the same objects enjoyed by a dog, and very different from the experience of an insect. Is it proper to say that a man, in knowing a shelf of books, makes it over, *creates* the object of his percept? Would the average man not read in philosophy be ignorant of the fact that things may seem different to different creatures? Would he be impelled by his knowledge to assert that each creature makes its own "things" or objects, when he is confronted by something as concrete and definite as a shelf of books?

A shelf of books can undoubtedly be made. It can easily be changed in a variety of ways. But can a man be said to make it, when he does nothing but open his eyes upon it? Can he be said to change it, when he allows his glance to pass over it, first from left to right, then from right to left? Common sense recognizes, does it not, that desire and purpose have much to do with the nature and order of our percepts? Is any man ignorant that the experiences we have are often determined by what we desire to look for and what we resolve to do? But does the fact that we vary the nature and order of our percepts necessarily mean that we are changing the objects we perceive? I see six dots on a bit of paper before me. I can think of them as  $2 + 2 + 2$ , or I can treat them as  $3 + 3$ . When I pass from the one operation to the other, does anything happen to the dots? Are there less or more of them? are their actual relations to each other changed? One may read a book with the deliberate intent of correcting typographical errors, or one may read it with a view to comprehending and criticizing the doctrine it embodies. Does common sense hold that the typographical errors made manifest in the one reading become nonexistent in the second? Or does it hold that they all remain unaltered unless they are changed in some quite different way?

Does this not indicate that common sense recognizes that the object is *independent* of the percept, and is revealed in experience as thus independent? that the nature of the object and the changes which take place in it are open to observation and need not be con-

founded with the nature of the percept at any given time, or with merely perceptual changes?

Let me summarize very briefly:

1. Does not common sense deny the numerical identity of percept and object, and recognize that they may vary independently?

2. Does it not, in tacitly accepting the significance for perception of brain and sense organs, implicitly hold that we can know things only as they seem to us?

3. Does it not repudiate the doctrine that we are shut up to mental representatives of things, and hold with a good deal of tenacity to the opinion that the "things themselves" are immediately given in perception?

4. Does it not insist that we can gain by observation the distinction between changes in our percepts and changes in their objects? Is this not a recognition of the independence of objects as given in experience?

Suppose that all these questions are answered in the affirmative. I should like to ask: (1) Are the answers unequivocal? (2) Are they mutually consistent? (3) Do they seem to be justified by fact, or is common sense plainly in error?

I have no disposition to treat the plain man as an oracle. But he may be regarded as material to be turned to account by the critical. In some fields his opinion is quite valueless; in others it is not. The distinction between percept and object is drawn first in our dealings with the familiar things of our every-day experience. We have not had to wait, before making it, for information which was brought us only with the progress of science. In the days of Thales, and long before them, men were compelled to deal with objects. What would have happened to them if they had been unable, in practise, to distinguish between percept and object, and to know when a given change in their experience indicated a change in this or that object, and when it did not?

It may be objected that the plain man has a right to *use* common distinctions which he finds in experience, but that he should eschew formulation. What right has he to a doctrine?

I answer: It is far from evident that he does his work in complete blindness. I am myself inclined to regard him as a witness by no means to be despised. Our ultimate appeal should be to common experience, and not to common sense, which, it must be admitted, implies something like a formulation of what may be revealed in common experience. But the disputes of philosophers make it evident that experience is an elusive thing. In helping us to a critical view of it, even this first vintage, this rough formulation, furnished by the opinions of plain men, may not be without its uses.

We can not assume men to be wholly blind to the distinctions that they are compelled to draw every day, and some of which they can only draw correctly after giving much thought and pains to the matter. It remains for the philosopher to sift their statements, to weigh the justice of each, and to look into this question of their mutual consistency. I shall turn to the philosopher in the next paper.

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## STUDIES IN THE STRUCTURE OF SYSTEMS

### 4. THE GENERATING PROBLEM<sup>1</sup>

THE fight for postulates and against axioms is a fight for freedom in mathematics and science. It is this aspect which thus far has been dominant in our discussion. Unlimited possibilities are therewith opened up; by surrendering the idea of "self-evidence" as a necessary requirement which the starting-point of "deduction" must satisfy, mathematicians have not only deepened their insight into the real relations between the propositions of a system, not only perfected their initial sets, not only increased the rigor of their deductions: the real logical requirements which a deductive system should satisfy to be acceptable have come to light;<sup>2</sup> for only if many accounts are possible can there be selection.

So far as the actual work in mathematics is concerned, nothing further, it would seem, need be added to what has already been said on this point. But for a theoretical account of the deductive system form it is insufficient merely to speak of "postulates" and the "postulate method." This theoretical insufficiency will become apparent whenever the method is applied to fields that have not already been worked over frequently; and it evinces itself in certain puzzling questions which sometimes trouble even the mathematician. That we can, to a degree not yet determined, but apparently unlimited, interchange theorems and postulates, *i. e.*, that the distinction between postulates and theorems is not inherent, not absolute, but relative to the order in a particular system, all this must be maintained. But, if the postulates appear as merely as-

<sup>1</sup> Some of the material of this paper was presented to the American Philosophical Association at its meeting at Yale University, in January, 1910. In the present paper I limit myself to a consideration of the "generating problem" in a *deductive* system.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. my paper, "Critique of Cognition and its Principles," this JOURNAL, Vol. VI., page 281.